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WASHINGTON, DC – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today welcomed the State Department’s release of its 2012 International Religious Freedom Report.

“USCIRF congratulates the State Department – particularly its Office of International Religious Freedom and Ambassador-at-Large Suzan Johnson Cook -- for its admirable work reporting on the many ways religious freedom is violated around the world,” said USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett. “Given that religious freedom conditions are deteriorating in many countries, the State Department’s extensive documentation of the nature and extent of these violations is especially important. The next crucial step is for the Secretary of State to promptly designate the worst violators as “countries of particular concern,” or CPCs, under the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).”

IRFA requires the United States annually to designate as CPCs those governments that “engage in or tolerate” systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, and to take action to encourage improvements in each CPC country. IRFA provides a range of options for such action, from bilateral agreements to sanctions. However, the United States has not made CPC designations since August 2011.

“Prompt CPC designations will send the signal that the United States prioritizes religious freedom. These designations, followed up with vigorous U.S. diplomatic activity, also provide the U.S. government with an effective tool to help end abuses and promote this fundamental human right,” continued Lantos Swett.

Prompt CPC designations are also vital because sanctions on the currently-designated CPCs will expire in August 2013. “Allowing sanctions to expire would send the inaccurate message that religious freedom is improving in those countries or that religious freedom is not important to U.S. foreign policy. That message would be especially misguided given the severity of the violations in many nations that top the U.S. foreign policy agenda, and the strong correlation between religious freedom, stability and security” said Lantos Swett.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) recently released its own [Annual Report](#) which highlights the status of religious freedom globally and identifies those governments that are the most egregious violators. In its Report, USCIRF recommended that the State Department again designate the following eight countries as CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan. USCIRF also found that seven other countries meet the CPC threshold and should be so designated: Egypt, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner please contact Samantha Schnitzer at (202) 786-0613 or [sschnitzer@uscirf.gov](mailto:sschnitzer@uscirf.gov).